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SKELTON'S *REPLYCACION*

Of the last years of Skelton's life nothing is known except the fact that he took refuge at Westminster, where he died in June, 1529.¹ In 1523 he wrote *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*,² in which he attacked violently Cardinal Wolsey's power over the king and court.

"He ruleth all at wyll,
Without reason or skyl:
How be it the primordiyall
Of his wretched originall,
And his base progeny,
And his gresy genealogy,
He came of the sank royall,
That was cast out of a bochers stall."³

At the beginning of the *Replycacion*, written against "certayne yong scolers," who were preaching against the dogmas of the Church, there is this elaborate and flattering dedication to Cardinal Wolsey:

"*Honorificatissimo, amplissimo, longeque reverendissimo in Christo patri, ac domino, domino Thomae, etc., tituli sanctae Ceciliae, sacrosanctae Romanae ecclesiae presbytero, Cardinali meritissimo, et apostolicae sedis legato, a latereque legato superillustri, etc., Skeltonis laureatus, ora. reg., humillimum dicit obsequium cum omni debita reverentia, tanto tamque magnifico digna principe sacerdotum, totiusque justitiae aequabilissimo moderatore, necnon praesentis opusculi fautore excellentissimo, etc., ad cuius auspiciatissimam contemplationem, sub memorabili prelo gloriosae immortalitatis, praesens pagella felicitatur, etc.*"⁴

How can we reconcile this dedication with the attack? In endeavoring to answer this question we are confronted with two problems; one concerning the date of the poem and the other, the explanation of the dedication.

It is clear from internal evidence that the *Replycacion* could not have been written before

¹ A. Dyce, *Works of John Skelton*, I, p. lix.

² E. Arber, *Surrey and Wyatt Anthology*, p. 159. The poem is convincingly dated from internal evidence.

³ *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*, 484-491. These lines are based upon the tradition that Wolsey was the son of a butcher of Ipswich.

⁴ Dyce, I, 230.

December 8, 1527, as the following lines refer to Thomas Bilney and Thomas Arthur:

"For ye were worldly shamed,
At Poules crosse openly,
All men can testifye;
There, lyke a sorte of sottes,
Ye were fayne to beare fagottes;
At the feest of her concepcon
Ye suffred suche correction."⁵

Bilney was one of the first of Cambridge scholars to be influenced by the reformation spirit. He was brought before Wolsey with his disciple, Arthur, and questioned as to his heretical preaching in Norfolk. In 1527 he recanted and as a penance carried a fagot at Paul's Cross at the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.⁶ I have been unable to find any record of scholars of either university suffering a similar humiliation before this year.

Why should Skelton write so flattering a dedication to a man against whom he had written a few years previous the violent satire, *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*? Brie's answer is that the dedication is not genuine. According to his theory the dedication was added later by some one, who wished to show clearly Skelton's authorship of the poem. Since Skelton's name had been so closely connected with that of the cardinal, the editor or whoever it may have been, endeavored to identify it by a dedication to Wolsey.⁷ The *Replycacion* was first printed by Pynson, who died in 1530. Therefore in a practically contemporary edition it is not likely that the story of his enmity against the cardinal had lost any force, and it is inconceivable that under such circumstances any one would have added the flattering dedication. If the poem had first appeared with many of the others in the decade of the sixties, this explanation would have greater force. Thümmel suggests that Wolsey did not know that Skelton was the author of *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*.⁸ For this reason he assumes that Skel-

⁵ *Replycacion*, 62-68.

⁶ J. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, ed. 1830, I, 116. J. B. Mullinger, *University of Cambridge*, ed. 1873, I, 607.

⁷ F. Brie, "Skelton-studien," *Englische Studien*, XXXVII, 13.

⁸ A. Thümmel, *Studien über J. Skelton*, p. 42.

ton was trying to gain Wolsey's assistance. It is not probable that such a biting satire as *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte* had not been reported to the cardinal before 1528, at least five years after its composition, and certainly it could not be credited to any other poet than Skelton. It is evident that neither of these explanations is adequate.

In the report of the visitation of Bishop Nicke to the Cathedral of Norwich for 1526, I find:

"DOMPNUS ROBERTUS WORSTED presbyter dicit inquisitus DOMINUM JOHANNEM SHELTON gravia crimina et nephanda peccata commisisse et propter hoc non fuisse punitum, in malum exemplum et perniciosum aliorum confratrum. Nam cum idem JOHANNES SHELTON missus fuerat Yernemutham ad poenitentiam ibidem agendam longe licentius et liberius ibidem vixit quam domi, villam taxillos et cartas quotidie frequentando. Et sua culpa multum deterioratur officium camerarii cui olim praeftuit; ita quod non speratur pensiones integras ab illo officio debitas et solvendas posse persolveri posterum."⁹

The first difficulty, which presents itself, is the identification of Shelton with the poet. The name of the poet is spelt with an *h* instead of a *k* in the record of the institution of his successor, and Blomefield states that the name was Shelton or Skelton.¹⁰ Skelton was rector at Diss at least as early as 1504 and retained his benefice till his death. I can find no other John Skelton in Norfolk except the Sheriff Sir John, who plainly is not the John of the entry. Moreover in two of the *Merie Tales*, falsely ascribed to Skelton, his name is connected with that of Bishop Nicke.¹¹ Although these tales are exaggerated anecdotes, they must have some basis in fact. According to them Skelton was accused by the Dominicans of keeping a concubine. For this offence he was summoned before Bishop Nicke, who reproved him and suspended him from his benefice. Possibly this was the time he was sent to Yarmouth.

⁹ *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich 1492-1532*, ed. Rev. A. Jessopp, 1887, p. 200.

¹⁰ Cf. Blomefield, *History of Norfolk*, I, 20.

¹¹ Dyce, I, p. lxxvi, ff. Tale VI and VII.

What the nature of the "gravia crimina" was we do not know. It is possible they refer to the concubine story or to an entry earlier in the report. "Et dicunt praeterea quod SHELTON recepit de proficuis officii sui, post recessum suum, xxli in detrimentum successoris et officii."¹² The office was that of camerarius and elemosinarius.¹³ These entries show at least that in 1526 Skelton was hard prest by his enemies, and it is very probable that he saw a way to make peace with both the Church and the cardinal by the *Replycacion*. Undoubtedly he hoped for aid from Wolsey in his difficulties, if he was unable to soothe the Church.

The subject of the *Replycacion* is a glorification of the dogma of the Church and a condemnation of heretics. It is evident that Skelton thought that he could win back his lost reputation by this means. The dedication was an appeal to Wolsey to assist the poet in his difficulties. The cardinal probably scorned all advances on the part of the poet, for the next year Skelton fled to Westminster, where he was protected by the Abbot Islip.¹⁴ The theory, advanced by Dyce, that Skelton was forced to go to Westminster soon after the composition of *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte* has been discussed by Brie, who objects to it for the following reasons. In the first place the cardinal could easily have deprived Skelton of his benefice, if he had wished. Secondly, if Skelton had been absent from his benefice for more than a year without special leave, he would have been suspended whether Wolsey interfered or not.¹⁵ Since the "Johannes Shelton" of the visitation of 1526 is probably the poet, the explanation that Skelton dedicated the *Replycacion* to Cardinal Wolsey as a means of extricating himself from the difficulties in which he was involved in Norfolk is most plausible.

For suggestions and assistance in connection with this note I am much indebted to Professor John M. Berdan of Yale University.

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¹² *Visitations*, p. 198.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁴ Dyce, I, p. lviii.

¹⁵ Brie, p. 14.